

Greece's new airport struggles to take off

A FEW days ago, I was among the last passengers to land at that fleapit of an airport, Hellenikon in Athens. I was then among the first to leave from the new airport at Spata, the opening of which left Greece gripped by an outpouring of national pride.

The television channels showed endless clips of the glittering new terminal building with its space-age control tower. Ministers toasted their good fortune, serenaded by a choir and watched by a curious assortment of celebrities mixed with orthodox priests. The air was heavy with the sound of backs being slapped. The enthusiasm was short-lived. Within hours, the only sound echoing round the plains of Spata was the scamporing of feet, as those involved tried to put as much distance between themselves and the airport as possible.

Everything that could go wrong, did, from misbehaving check-in desks to duty-free tills

that would not take any cash. Olympic Airways cancelled more than 30 flights in a single day.

So nationalistic pride has swiftly given way to predictable "told you so" shrugs. The airport is not even a home-grown Greek affair. It was built by a consortium led by Hochtief, of Germany, and paid for by the European Union (you and me, in other words). The Greek taxpayer contributed just 7 per cent of the £1.4 billion cost.

Spata takes its place among great airport opening flops of our time, joining Denver, with its malfunctioning luggage systems, and Hong Kong, with its (initial) cargo problems. The overnight switch from Kai Tak to Chep Lap Kok was a triumph, all things considered, but it will be remembered for

the pictures of rotting produce piling up in the cargo areas.

Eleftherios Venizelos airport, some 17 miles east of Athens, is impressive enough as a feat of engineering. But no sooner had the Greeks got their hands on it than the whole enterprise degenerated into chaos. And while they might blame it on teething problems, fundamental design flaws suggest that visiting Athens will remain the chaotic experience it always has been.

Despite hundreds of counters, the queues at Spata were as bad as at any airport. Walking through the terminal, fluorescent strip lighting reflects back at you from the shiny marble floor, leaving you feeling that you are continuously about to fall off the edge of a cliff.

The central atrium has a



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number of shops and a token newsagent. But once through passport control, the only shops in evidence are duty-free ones piled to the ceiling with Toblerones and Vodka. There is not a magazine or newspaper in sight.

There were continual announcements in Greek and English reminding passengers that there will be no announcements. This makes sense only in a place such as Greece.

One thing of which there is no shortage is lavatories. Unfortunately, they can accommodate only one or two persons at a time, which could be

a problem, with an estimated 16 million passengers a year. Even on day one, the queues were stretching down the corridors.

There is talk of Spata becoming a major hub, with passenger numbers rising to perhaps 50 million a year. That goal looks a long way off.

The confusion of opening day was captured admirably by the Time Café, with its clocks showing the time in New York, Tokyo and London. All the times were wrong. The counter staff, few of whom spoke English, dispensed coffee and rolls at the usual extortionate prices.

My Olympic flight to London landed at Spata at about the time we were due to take off. As a one-hour delay became two hours (and with no explanation from airport staff), I turned in desperation to the duty-free shops. Even this proved fruitless: the tills had crashed and they couldn't take my money. I then tried using the state-of-the-art credit card telephones. None was working.

So, no duty free, no telephones, no English, no announcements. The best came from the Olympic pilot after we finally got airborne four hours late. Spata, he explained, has a new underground refuelling system in which fuel is piped directly to the gate. No little petrol lorries chugging around the apron. Trouble was, no one could fig-

ure out how the system worked, adding another two hours to the wait.

None of this bodes very well for the Olympic Games in 2004.

One of the biggest gripes about Spata is its distance from downtown Athens. The airport highway has yet to be finished, resulting in an agonising crawl through the outer suburbs of the city. Travellers were being advised to allow three hours for their journey.

The International Air Transport Association (IATA) urged the Greek authorities to put off opening the airport until the roads were finished. The joke is that you can fly to Rome in the time it takes you to reach the city centre.

My journey to Spata was relatively painless. For 1,000 drachma (about £2), passen-

gers can make it to the outskirts by underground (again built by foreigners, in this case Bechtel, the US project management group responsible for London's Jubilee Line extension).

This connects with an express coach service, which is included in the fee. My journey took less than an hour, but Spata is a long, long way from Piraeus, with its ferry connections to the islands.

The airport authorities have further enraged airlines by imposing steep increases in take-off and landing fees.

The only entity to come out of the exercise covered in any sort of glory is Hochtief, which tackled the project with customary German efficiency. Its work even ran to uprooting and moving a 700-year old Byzantine church that lay on the edge of the western runway.

With the countdown to the Olympics ticking away, that church might come in useful after all.